CORE
Metadata, citation and similar papers at core.ac.uk
Provided by Via Sapientiae: The Institutional Repository at DePaul University

DePaul University
University Libraries

Vincentian Heritage Journal

Volume 26
Issue 1 *Volume 23-25.2, 26.1*

Article 15

Fall 2005

Practitioner Perspective: Reflections of the Development of a Values-based Curriculum

Laurie Worrall Ed.D.

Follow this and additional works at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj

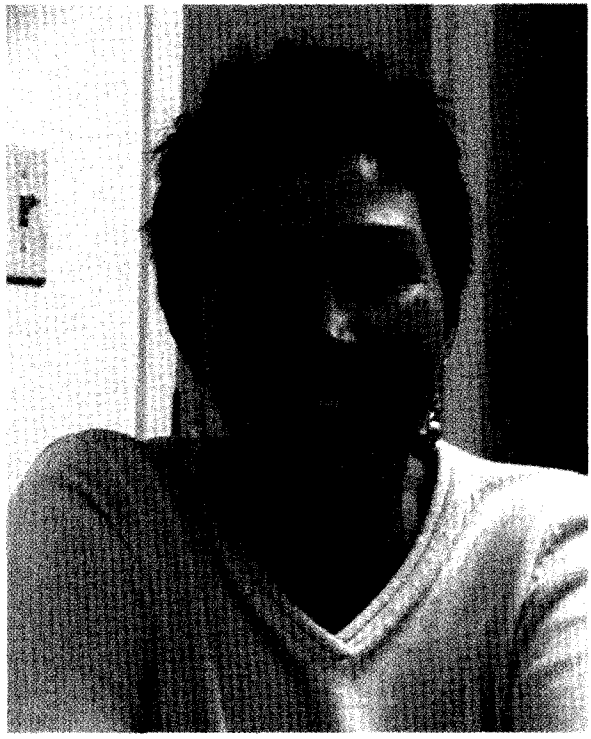
Recommended Citation

Worrall, Laurie Ed.D. (2005) "Practitioner Perspective: Reflections of the Development of a Values-based Curriculum," *Vincentian Heritage Journal*: Vol. 26 : Iss. 1 , Article 15.
Available at: https://via.library.depaul.edu/vhj/vol26/iss1/15

This Articles is brought to you for free and open access by the Vincentian Journals and Publications at Via Sapientiae. It has been accepted for inclusion in Vincentian Heritage Journal by an authorized editor of Via Sapientiae. For more information, please contact digitalservices@depaul.edu.

Practitioner Perspective: Reflections on the Development of a Values-based Curriculum

By
Laurie Worrall. Ed.D.



Laurie Worrall, Ed.D.
Courtesy of The Hay-Vincentian Leadership Project

Saint Vincent de Paul said "Prayer and study should resolve themselves into actions; the light in the mind should become a fire in the heart and on the lips of the apostle."[1] If the definition of prayer is broadened beyond the rote recitations that many of us associate with the word to include deep, meditative contemplation, then this quotation cuts to the heart of leadership. Meditation, thoughtfulness, and discernment should precede and motivate action; they should light the imagination which in turn should motivate a person to action. Communication of the vision — the light of the mind — is the last element that creates an effective leader. Some kind of spiritual centeredness seems to be at the core of the great leaders of history. In my own experience, meditation — prayer, if you will — always results in decisions that bring the greatest benefit to the largest number of people involved.

When DePaul asked me to start its community–based service learning program, I knew that the highest academic officer of the university viewed it as a major initiative, a significant and visible commitment by the university to its urban community. The request required deep meditation on my part. It was especially challenging because directing such an initiative at DePaul had not figured into my short or long-term plans. In fact, I had a competing offer that more closely aligned with my immediate interests and career goals. I believed that my work at the university was finished. I had helped put the plan together for a service learning program, but I was not the person who would lead the effort. What did I know? I did not possess a terminal degree. I did not know many faculty members. As I had been directing a successful professional education program for adults, I did not know any students. I thought, "Why on earth would someone as intelligent as Richard Meister (our provost) ask me to start a program that better educated people had been less successful at?"

During the days that followed as I meditated on this request and sincerely sought to discern the best course of action for everyone involved, I asked myself, "Where can I do the most good for the most people?" I was sincerely open to any answer. By the following week it was obvious that DePaul's offer was the one that met my criteria. While I accepted the challenge that DePaul had set in front of me, I

---

[1] In J. Patrick Murphy, C.M., ed., *Visions and Values in Catholic Higher Education* (Kansas City, MO: Sheed & Ward, 1991), 140.

was not convinced I would be happy for long. Well, five years into a two year commitment, my work is still not finished.

The challenge of starting a service learning program at DePaul appealed to me for all of the reasons that it might have appealed to Vincent de Paul. In the recent publication, "About Saint Vincent de Paul and DePaul University's Vincentian, Catholic and Urban Identity," Edward Udovic, C.M., describes Vincent as "having been: values-driven, ...connected to the community, ...supportive of diversity, ...a risk taker, ...innovative and ...pragmatic," qualities that all apply to community-based service learning pedagogy. Over the years, they have, in fact, proven to be more than qualities; they have been priorities and strategies.

Values-Driven. Community-based service learning (CbSL) is a pedagogy that fits DePaul perfectly and in which it has always been engaged in some form. At its best, this pedagogy helps faculty and students address head-on difficult issues of social justice, human rights and social equity, always within the context of community service that is integrated into academic study. DePaul describes itself as a values-based institution. CbSL is a values-based pedagogy that asks faculty and students to reflect upon the conditions of inequity that require community service in the first place.

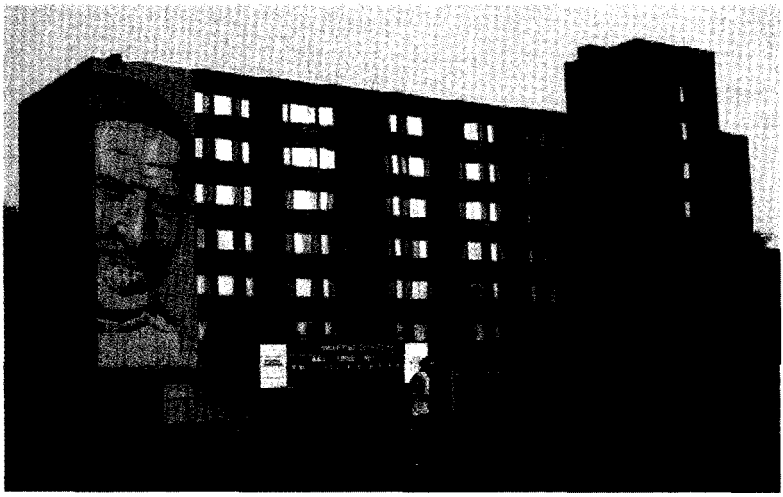
The values that a leader conveys through actions and the spoken word define the working environment. My own values are deeply rooted in justice, equity and service. They were at the heart of the work of establishing the Steans Center for Community-based Service Learning. They inform our staff discussions about current projects and new opportunities. However, I also value humor and creativity, so the environment that I influence encourages both. Humor and creativity maintain sanity when the work demands too much. It is humor and creativity that carry work groups through the rough periods of personal conflict and confrontation.

The Steans Center is presently the most significant manifestation of how I put my own values into practice as a leader. The fact that I lead a center of its size and stature at DePaul is a testament to how closely aligned the institution's values have been with my own. I have worked hard to attract and retain staff at the Center whose values not only align with but help strengthen the institution. The beauty of engaging in values-based work at a values-based institution is that my life is more integrated. The fusion of work and play, vocation and avocation, is energizing rather than draining,

exciting rather than demoralizing. In a society where it seems that so many people struggle to cope with highly fragmented lives, I feel genuinely blessed to have created a situation for myself and those around me to integrate their personal and professional values. In fact, the discussion of integrating personal goals with the goals for the Center is an explicit conversation at our annual strategic planning retreat.

The value of service to our community partners is perhaps the one that provides the most sustenance for Steans Center staff. This is, of course, merely a microcosm of the overarching value of service to humanity that drives me and those who have chosen to work with me. All of us have chosen to further the mission of the Center because educating for a more just and equitable world is at the heart of the pedagogy, and it is what motivates each of us as individuals. Service then takes on greater meaning than merely showing up at a food pantry to make sandwiches. Service can also mean research that creates new knowledge about why situations of poverty persist, or what physically segregates people from the resources that they need. It should always mean employing our individual talents to make the world a better place for all, thereby multiplying the value of our talents.

The value of service informs the structure of the Steans Center itself. Each of us views our work as service to help faculty, students and community organizations benefit from the university – community partnerships that we have developed. A full-time staff member who is a doctoral candidate works with faculty one-on-one to help them integrate community service into their courses more effectively. Another full-time staff member works with community organizations to help them use our faculty and student time more effectively. Twenty-three undergraduate and graduate student staff members help students benefit from the CbSL courses that they are enrolled in, and from the service that they contribute to community partners. It should be obvious that the Center is an intermediary organization that works to leverage the resources of DePaul to serve Chicago communities in a way that is mutually beneficial. In this respect, I think that there is an analogy to be made between our work and that of Vincent de Paul's in as much as he leveraged his influence with those who held resources to benefit the poor of 17th Century Paris.



The McCabe Hall Apartments, with mural of Vincent de Paul.
DePaul University, Chicago, Illinois.
Image collection of DePaul University

Connected to Community. As our structure of service has developed, a core purpose of connecting communities to each other has emerged. The obvious connection in the early days was the bridge that students developed between DePaul CbSL courses and the community partners that they served. We quite literally connect the DePaul academic community to our surrounding urban communities through the academically-based community service that our students engage in. It became apparent after our first year that we connect more communities to each other than we at first realized.

I often describe CbSL courses as the curricular bridge that connects the mission of DePaul's academic community to the mission of our sponsoring Vincentian community. This is a more subtle distinction in that there may not be many physical interactions between the communities through CbSL courses, yet these courses represent a substantial link between the two missions: one to serve the poor, the other to educate.

The Center connects individual members of communities to each other. This has been particularly apparent during our annual faculty institutes, to which all faculty who are involved in community-based learning are invited. I have seen faculty who have taught at DePaul for years meet one another for the first time through a common

interest in communities. Likewise, we have introduced community members to each other through their common connection with the Center.

By far the most rewarding aspect to our work is connecting students to community issues. Many students have discovered deep connections within themselves to communities as a result of traveling the CbSL bridge. It is not uncommon for students to develop more substantive connections to each other through deepened connections to their work in our urban communities.

Ultimately, my own sense of community grounds my leadership practices, particularly as it relates to developing the community of a work group. People's lives are complicated. In the U.S., we often spend more time working than we spend doing anything else. When people are engaged in mission-driven work, they can find themselves consumed by it. It is important that the work environment develop a sense of its own community so that people feel supported by their colleagues. The more sustenance we draw from our work community, the more that community has to offer others. The truth of this becomes especially apparent during times of criticism and conflict. Criticism becomes more constructive – and is therefore heard – when an individual is sure of the support he or she has in the work community. Similarly, conflict is easier to put into perspective when a sense of community grounds the work environment.

DePaul's deep sense of service to society has defined the development of the Steans Center. A CbSL program at DePaul had to serve our urban communities well. It was important for the integrity of my individual relationships to the DePaul community. It was important for DePaul's institutional and my personal relationship with our external communities. The quality of community-connectedness has profoundly influenced my conviction that higher education institutions have a responsibility to their surrounding communities. Often the health and well-being of these communities hinges on an institution of higher education developing the will and ability to connect to its communities. This can only happen if the university transforms itself to make community engagement a priority.

Supportive of Diversity. Diversity is the kind of issue that is difficult to lie about. Either you are walking the talk or you are not. Most of the time all one has to do is take a look at who is on staff. Staff diversity has been a priority of mine. I have been intentional and vocal about it. But it has not been easy. Diversity means that people are

different. When people are different, they bring differing perspectives on issues. Everyone has to be prepared to face and resolve the conflict that arises when there are differing views on how to resolve important issues. If one cares deeply about the issues and the value of diversity, one has to be prepared to listen hard and with patience.

Diversity comes in all shapes and sizes. While I strive for racial, ethnic, gender and religious diversity at the staff level, the Center is also intentional about organizational diversity. We could easily have decided to work only with organizations that had the capacity to work with us. We could have selected large non-profit organizations in Chicago in which to place our 1700+ students annually. They are accessible. They provide excellent avenues for career exploration. They often possess sophisticated volunteer programs. But this strategy would have missed the mark that Vincent set for us – the challenge to serve those most in need. Instead, we focus on small non-profit, community-based organizations (CBOs) in Chicago. This has given us the flexibility to diversify the neighborhoods that we work in and the issues that we work on. We serve organizations that serve young children, youth and adults. We work with Latino, African-American, Asian and Caucasian populations.

Risk Taker. Udovic characterizes Vincent de Paul as a person who "felt that so much was at stake, he was always willing to take calculated risks." So much is at stake in our global society that individuals and organizations with resources must find the courage and perspicacity to take calculated risks. Global wealth is concentrated in the hands of a few people while millions perish from starvation. Fewer U.S. citizens vote than at any other time in our history. Access to higher education threatens to become the privilege of the wealthy. Public school systems allow young minds to languish in between standardized tests. Much is at stake.

At first glance it might appear that the issues a tuition-driven, comprehensive, private university faces have little relevance to the social issues of wealth disparity in our society, failing public schools, or desperate poverty in other countries. Institutions of higher education have enough to do simply to stay competitive with others in their ranking. However, if we fail to educate our students to participate in democratic process and address social inequities, we ultimately fail society. To both stay competitive and serve society requires an institution to take calculated risks. DePaul took a large calculated risk when it established the Steans Center for CbSL. Most students enter

into higher education to get credentialed so that their lives will be more successful. The DePaul student is not much different. Social justice education is not usually at the top of the list of educational priorities. Educating our faculty and students to confront societal inequities inside and outside of the classroom flies in the face of what mainstream society would agree is an essential education. The university administration took the calculated risk that a CbSL program could be developed in such as way as to avoid alienating an important constituent – students. However, it took this risk based upon a deeply rooted understanding of its own mission, values and identity.

To a lesser extent, university administration took a risk when it entrusted me with the charge to develop such a social justice education program. It trusted that I would honor my agreement to establish a Center with a degree of integrity that would add to and not diminish DePaul's reputation in and deep connection to the city of Chicago. I took a similar risk by agreeing to direct the Center. I had not intended to develop a career in higher education. I had simply come to DePaul to complete a graduate degree. What if my career stalled? What if I failed? Yet I knew from experience that without taking calculated risks, we rarely make significant strides forward. Calculated risks teach us how much we can and should trust other people, and how much we can and should trust ourselves. Such risks also force us to grow, and it is the growth of individuals that contributes to institutional and societal advancement.

Innovative. The task of effecting change is one that requires multiple innovation competencies. A leader must be both innovative and able to recognize innovation in others. Designing effective strategies for change and persuading people to accept change require innovation. Recognizing innovation in others and rewarding it are the hallmarks of a truly innovative leader. Vincent's inspiration to innovate was love, but love as defined by agapé; love as characterized by patience, kindness, humility, respectfulness, forgiveness, honesty, and commitment. These characteristics build the fortitude to persevere toward successful innovation.

Innovative implies inventive and entrepreneurial. It is closely aligned with risk taking. A leader needs to possess the ability to be innovative and to take risks, but the leader must also provide an environment that supports innovation and calculated risk taking by others. This point is key to the long-term success of any work. My own ability to be innovative is something that I value and I consider a

key to my success. If I am truly a leader, then I will develop this quality in others and I will reward it. I must recognize innovative leadership in those who report to me and avoid being threatened by it. I have often been startled at how easily threatened successful people can become by younger innovative thinkers. A curious blend of humility and confidence is required if a leader is to be an effective mentor to emerging leaders. I see this as my ultimate charge, to develop the leadership that will succeed me.

Innovation comes in many forms. It may be a genuinely new way of doing something. It may be an adaptation of a current practice that brings a fresh perspective to the work. When DePaul launched the Steans Center, there were twenty such centers at colleges and universities across the country. We were certainly not the first to develop an institution-wide service learning program. Our innovation has been in our adaptation of existing models to suit DePaul's systems and culture. Innovative concepts have emerged out of this process of adaptation, but only as long as I have been willing to withhold judgment on new ideas. As the leader at the Steans Center, if I am not open to considering new perspectives on our work, even if ideas appear to challenge practices that I may be invested in, I squelch the innovative tendencies of others. Innovation requires the ability to welcome new ideas.

Pragmatic. As long as values remain theoretical, they are of no real use to anyone. Values need to result in action or they remain irrelevant platitudes. One definition of pragmatic found in the dictionary includes the words practical and accomplishment. This quality is where the rubber meets the road. An innovative leader who lacks the pragmatism to accomplish a vision is a dreamer and often ineffectual. A leader who takes risks but lacks pragmatism will gamble away the resources.

The work at Steans Center is grounded in the pragmatism of mutual benefit. CbSL courses are developed with the needs and capacity of our community partners clearly in focus. Instructors may come to us with wonderful ideas of how community experiences will benefit the students in their classes, but if instructors cannot identify how a community agency will tangibly benefit, we cannot in good conscience support the course. Conversely, a community partner may approach us with a worthy project, but if there is no clear academic benefit to a student or faculty member, we cannot in good conscience promote the project as a good match for a course. From the outset,

I have been clear that if we hope to accomplish any good, we must develop the program with an eye to sustainable relationships with our community partner agencies. One of the Center's roles has been to educate the university community about the negative impact that short periods of community service can have on community organizations. Trust between partners is rarely built on the short time frame of a ten-week academic quarter. In fact, the academic calendar can wreak havoc with the schedules of community-based organizations. The Steans Center has built DePaul's CbSL program by focusing on serving the community well.

My own leadership style is characterized by pragmatism. My process of decision-making includes a calculation of accepting the opportunities at hand against the prospect of accomplishing the work well. Pragmatism manifests itself in fiscal responsibility, sensitive personnel management, and attention to detail and follow-up. The work must be done well within the financial and personnel constraints that exist.

\+ + +

Leadership at its best involves people in the quality and substance of the work at hand. The most effective leaders keep a focus on the goals, but allow plenty of room for humor, fun and creativity because they generate energy and enthusiasm. The Vincentian qualities of leadership discussed above manifest themselves in numerous ways, whether or not one chooses to call them Vincentian. Leaders that embody these characteristics accomplish great things. They also attract resources. These are the kind of leaders that other people want to work with. They are the kind of people that can demonstrate tangible outcomes so they attract financial resources. They are good people who engage in good work that they insist on doing well. They connect people to each other. They welcome difference even though it often brings temporary conflict. They calculate the risks of innovative ideas and are honest about the prospects of accomplishing those ideas. They do what they say they are going to do. I suspect that Vincent de Paul did, too.